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"MY MOTHERLAND" SERIES XE. NO. 34

GOKHALE

AND

THE SERVANTS OF INDIA

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GOKHALE

AND

THE SERVANTS OF INDIA

"The Taj at Agra, the Ashram on the banks of the sacred Sabarmathi and the Servants of India Society—these are the three things that stand out unique and noble in India, things that no visitor should fail to see."

This was how an enlightened American lady, who has several times travelled round the globe, summed up her impressions of India. And this view is shared by most of the foreign visitors, though the Servants of India have not been getting the attention they deserve from the sons of the soil, especially during the recent years of our stormy politics.

But the contribution made by this band of self-less workers to the growth of our national consciousness has been remarkable. Founded by that noble patriot, Gokhale, the Servants of India Society, stands out indeed as a unique institution. It was the first attempt at spiritualising our politics, and to realize its greatness, we must go back to the life of its illustrious founder.

"This diamond of India the gem of Maharashtra," as the great Lokamanya, his life-long rival called him, was born in the Kolhapur State in 1886, of poor Brahmin parents. Mainly due to the self-denying efforts of his elder brother, Gopala Krishna Gokhale was able to join a local English school. Later he went to Bombay and graduated in 1884 from the Elphinstone College.

A degree in those days was very valuable and Gopalkrishna's brother wanted him to go to England for the

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I. C. S. But the brilliant scholar, burning with the zeal of service to the Motherland chose the humbler profession of a teacher. He joined the Deccan Education Society as a life-member, took the vow of poverty and agreed to serve for 20 years on a mere pittance of seventy rupees a month. As a professor in the Fergusson College, he won the admiration of his colleagues and his masterly exposition of English, Mathematics and Economics won the heart of the students.

Enters Public Service

It was at this time that he came under the influence of Justice Ranade, whom he revered as his *Guru*. Under Ranade's expert guidance, Gokhale took to an exhaustive study of Indian Economics. He was a tower of strength to the Sarvajanik Sabha of Poona and was for many years editor of its quarterly journal. He also distinguished himself as the Secretary of the Bombay Provincial Conference for four years and when the Indian National Congress met in Poona in 1895, he was chosen as the Secretary.

By this time his public activities were so well-known that he was called upon to give evidence before the Welby Commission on Indian expenditure. In 1900, he was elected as a member of the Bombay Legislative Council where he worked along with Sir Phirozeshah Mehta.

By 1902, the period of service to which he had bound himself to the Deccan Society came to an end, and Gokhale entered into the wider field of national service. In the same year he was nominated to the Viceroy's Council, where, year after year, he maintained the steady fire of his masterly criticism of the Government. His budget speeches were such master-pieces of financial criticism that his opponents on the Government benches and the Anglo-Indian press outside had to accept most of his suggestions. Even the proud Curzon was forced to acknowledge his merits. His speeches on the

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budget have now become classics. Even now, men whose grasp of Indian finance is unquestioned, confess that after Gokhale there has, as yet, risen no genius who could so well analyse the budget.

Much as they disliked Gokhale's strictures, even the Government of India members loved to hear his speech. And once when Gokhale was absent from the Council, the Finance Member said : " I feel to-day as though we are playing Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark."

Congress Presidency

In 1904, Gokhale went to London as a member of a deputation to do propaganda in England. And in the following year he established the Servants of India Society. It was in the same year, too, that he achieved that crowning honour in Indian public life, the presidency of the National Congress at Benares.

His speech on that occasion ranks as one of the best ever delivered on the Congress platform. With bitter sarcasm he indicted the Curzonian regime in no uncertain terms.

" Gentlemen", he said, " how true it is to say that to everything there is an end! Thus even the Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon has come to a close. For a parallel to such an administration, we must go back to the times of Aurangazeb of our own country."

" The fact is," Gokhale continued " that Lord Curzon came over to India with certain fixed ideas. To him India was a country, where the Englishman was to monopolize for all times all power and talk all the while of duty. The Indian's only business was to be governed, and it was sacrilege on his part to have any other aspiration.

" In his scheme of things there was no room for the educated classes of the country, and having failed to amuse them for any length of time by an empty show of taking

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them into his confidence, he proceeded in the end to repress them. Even in his last speech at the Byculla Club in Bombay, India only exists only as a scene of the Englishman's labours, with the toiling millions of the country—eighty per cent. of the population—in the background. The remaining twenty per cent. for ought they are worth, might as well be gently swept into the sea!"

Gokhale also exposed the hypocrisy of those who talk of the interests of the Indian masses. And as this device is once again being used by India's enemies, Gokhale's words are of considerable interest:

"The attempt to distinguish between the interests of the educated classes and those of the bulk of their countrymen is a favourite device with those who seek to repress the legitimate aspirations of the people. It is significant that Lord Curzon never resorted to it till he had finally broken with the educated classes. The distinction is unreal and ridiculous and we know that even those who use it as a convenient means to disparage the educated classes do not themselves believe in it."

Nationalist Awakening

The next year Gokhale again went to England on a political mission. Then came the Minto-Morley Reforms and in the reformed council Gokhale continued his good work. But the situation in the country rendered it increasingly difficult and even painful. People were losing patience. The autocratic reign of the haughty Curzon had left bitter memories in the heart of the people. The gaping wounds of the Partition of Bengal were not easy to heal. A new national consciousness had been awakened and the minds of the youth became inflamed. The Tilak school became dominant and Gokhale and the elder Congressmen were ridiculed for their moderation.

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"Whatever you do, my Lord," Gokhale had pleaded in an impassioned appeal in the Council Chamber, "let not the words 'too late' be written on it." But unfortunately, it was just the fate which overtook every one of the Government's concessions to the popular demand. But still Gokhale did not lose heart. He continued in his own gentle way to fight and remonstrate with the Government.

Those were difficult times for Gokhale. With the surging tide of extreme nationalism, the moderates began to lose their influence in the country. They were ridiculed as mendicants and openly accused as fawning traitors. Gokhale's reply to these criticisms, recorded the late Lalaji, was quite touching:

"We are not beggars and our policy is not that of mendicancy" he said. "We are ambassadors of our people at a foreign court, to watch and guard the interests of our country and get as much for her as we can."

"Do you think, my friend, we are so devoid of self-respect and so base as to be happy at our country being under foreign yoke? I would have my country free to-day, if that were possible. But is it possible? Can we work on that basis? In politics you must consider what is practical and what is impractical. We can in no way bind future generations. Who are we to bind them irrevocably? We are doing what we, in our own times, consider best and practicable."

In one of his brilliant speeches in the Council, Gokhale quoted these lines:

"I do not ask to see the distant scene:
One step's enough for me."

And that admirably sums up the political philosophy of this great practical idealist.

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Two Great Fights

Much of the splendid work he did inside the Council were bereft of any substantial result. His eloquent pleadings were all in vain. The voice of wisdom was not heeded. And of these later years of his Council work, two episodes stand out prominent. One was his advocacy of the cause of Indians in South Africa and the other, the Bill he introduced for a scheme of free compulsory elementary education.

It was a magnificent scheme and if only the Government had had the sense to accept it, India to-day would have been much nearer the goal, and most of the bitterness that has since intervened between the rulers and the ruled would have been avoided. But it was not to be. In spite of the whole-hearted support of the entire nation, the Government opposed it and the Bill was lost.

Gokhale was a stout champion of the interests of the Indians abroad. He strongly supported their agitation in South Africa against the humiliating disabilities imposed upon them. In 1912, he visited the Union and toured through all the important towns where Indians had settled. Everywhere a warm welcome awaited him and Gokhale tried, to the best of his abilities, to make the White Government less race-blind.

With Gandhiji

His interest in the South African problem brought him into more intimate contact with Gandhiji. The Mahatma was at that time comparatively little known and it is interesting to note that even in those days, Gokhale recognised the greatness in that fragile agitator.

"In all my life," he confessed, "I have known only two men who have affected me spiritually in the manner that Mr. Gandhi does—our great patriarchr. Dadabhoy Naoroji and my late master, Ranade—men before whom not only are we ashamed of doing anything unworthy, but in whose presence

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our very minds are afraid of thinking anything that is unworthy."

And at the Lahore Congress, when Gokhale referred to Gandhiji's "immortal part" in the South African struggle, his speech was so touching that the whole Congress broke down in tears, while for a few minutes a solemn silence reigned in the house.

"Gentleman," he said, "it is one of the privileges of my life that I know Mr. Gandhi intimately, and I can tell you that a purer, a nobler, a braver and a more exalted spirit has never moved on this earth. He is a man who may be well described as a man among men, a hero among heroes, a patriot amongst patriots, and we may well say that in him, Indian humanity at the present time has reached its high watermark."

And what may appear strange to many, Gokhale gave his whole-hearted support to Gandhiji's Passive Resistance campaign.

Gandhiji and his followers, he said in the same speech, had done nothing unworthy in launching the Passive Resistance struggle.

"What is this Passive Resistance?" he asked and went on: "It is essentially defensive in its nature and it fights with moral and spiritual weapons. A passive resister resists tyranny by undergoing suffering in his own person.

"He pits soul force against brute force; he pits the divine in man against the brute in man; he pits suffering against oppression; he pits conscience against might; he pits faith against injustice; right against wrong. A passive resister deliberately and openly violates the requirements of an unjust law or order for the simple reason, that he cannot conscientiously submit to that law or order.

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"He does not seek to evade the consequences of that law, but invites them and he glories in them. It is a spiritual struggle essentially in keeping with the highest traditions of Indian spirituality. I repeat that our countrymen have done nothing unworthy. On the contrary, everything that they have done is worthy of them."

Gandhiji's Guru

Gandhiji's veneration for Gokhale is equally touching. Writing under the caption, "A Confession of Faith" in *Young India* in 1921, Gandhiji affirms that Gokhale was his political *Guru*.

"Discipleship, however," he writes, "is a sacred personal matter. I fell at Dadabhai's feet in 1888, but he seemed to be too far away from me. I could be as son to him, not disciple. In 1896, I met almost all the known leaders of India in connection with my South African mission. Justice Ranade awed me. I could hardly talk in his presence. Badrudin Tyabji fathered me and asked me to be guided by Ranade and Phirozeshah."

After recounting his meeting with the Lokamanya and Dr. Bhandarkar, both of whom he venerated, Gandhiji says: "That little throne was still unoccupied. I had many heroes but no king."

"But it was different with Gokhale," he writes. "I cannot say why. I met him at his quarters on the college ground. It was like meeting an old friend or better still, a mother after long separation. His gentle face put me at ease in a moment. His minute enquiries about myself and my doings in South Africa, at once enshrined him in my heart. And as I parted from him, I said to myself 'you are my man.'

"And from that moment, Gokhale never lost sight of me. In 1901, on my second return from South Africa, we

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became closer still. He simply 'took me in hand' and began to fashion me. My mother was not more solicitous about me than Gokhale. There was, so far as I am aware, no reserve between us. It was really a case of love at first sight, and it stood the severest strain in 1913.

" He seemed to me all I wanted as a political worker—pure as crystal, gentle as a lamb, brave as a lion, and chivalrous to a fault. He was and remains for me the most perfect man in the political field.

" Not that we had no differences. We differed even in 1901, in our views on social customs. We discovered differences in our estimate of Western civilization. He frankly differed from me in my extreme views on non-violence. But these differences mattered neither to him nor to me. Nothing could put us asunder.

" It were blasphemous to conjecture," concludes Gandhiji, " what would have happened if he were alive to-day. I know that I would have been working under him."

Dies a Martyr

Gokhale's strenuous work both during the South African tour and on the Royal Commission for the Public Services soon told on his health. On the 19th of February 1915, he passed away plunging the whole nation into deep mourning. In the words of an English friend, Gokhale lived and died, as a true Brahmin, without self and without stain.

" His experiences on the Public Service Commission " wrote Lajput Rai, " saddened the last days of his life. He could not bear the insults, that witness after witness, (from among the Anglo-Indians) heaped on his countrymen, their character, their honesty and their capacity."

But in spite of the most bitter experiences, he never lost faith in Britain. His famous dictum accepting the British

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connection as "ordained, in the inscrutable dispensation of Providence for India's good" has become historic.

"And I recall that phrase," says a British journalist who met him in England, "and the smile, half of irony, and half of resignation with which it was spoken". But the "last political testament" of Gokhale in which he drew up a scheme of post-war reforms for India, and for publishing which Lord Willingdon and the Aga Khan showed such zeal, shows that Gokhale had not lost all hopes in England's good faith even after his experiences in the Services Commission.

The Servants of India

Gokhale is dead but his name and spirit live for ever. His ideals and sacrifice are immortalised by the glorious institution he has left to the nation. For twenty-eight years now, the Servants of India have been at work, and year by year their activities are expanding.

"Public life must be spiritualised." That was the declaration with which Gokhale started the Society in 1905. He wanted a band of political sanyasins with no other religion except the love of the Motherland.

"Love of country," he laid down in the preamble to the constitution of the Society, "must so fill the heart, that all else shall appear as of little moment by its side. A fervent patriotism which rejoices at every opportunity of sacrifice for the Motherland, a dauntless heart which refuses to be turned back from its object by difficulty or danger, a deep faith in the purpose of Providence which nothing can shake—equipped with these, the worker must start on his mission and reverently seek the joy which comes of spending oneself in the service of the Motherland."

And the objects of the Society are thus set down:

"The Servants of India Society will train men prepared to devote their lives to the cause of the country in a religious

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spirit and will seek to promote, by all constitutional means, the national interests of the Indian people. Its members will direct their efforts, principally, towards (1) creating among the people, by example and by precept, a deep and passionate love of the Motherland, seeking its highest fulfilment in service and sacrifice; (2) organizing the work of political education and agitation, basing it on a careful study of public questions and strengthening generally the public life of the country; (3) promoting relations of cordial goodwill and co-operation among the different communities; (4) assisting educational movements, especially those for the education of women, the education of backward classes and industrial and scientific education; (5) helping forward the industrial development of the country; and (6) the elevation of the depressed classes."

A Good Response

These are noble ideals. And young men burning with that spirit of self-sacrifice and service which the rigorous rules of the Society demanded were not found wanting. Soon a brilliant and a cultured band of self-less workers rallied to Gokhale's standard and are still keeping aloft his traditions.

And Gokhale was most happy in the choice of the men. For almost everyone of them to-day has won fame in his particular line of service. The silver-tongued Sastri has won imperial fame as the charming ambassador of India. The splendid work of Devadhar in the social and co-operative spheres is well-known throughout the country. Mr. Joshi fights his ceaseless battles for the cause of Labour, both inside and outside the councils, and at international gatherings. Mr. Thakkar has won the heart of the Bhils among whom he worked for a generation and stands to-day in the vanguard of the fight against untouchability. Pandit Kunzru's varied activities and his splendid organization of

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the Seva Samiti, has earned for him the esteem and admiration of the whole country. And the other members, continuing their silent service in different parts of the land, have justified Gokhale's hopes.

And this scrupulous choice of their members is one of the secrets of the success of the Society. For, though a small body—and even to-day, after 28 years of growth there are only twenty-seven members—the influence that the Servants commanded in the country is indeed unique.

Numerous Activities

Another special feature of the Society is that the work of the members is not done in the Society's name itself, but under the auspices of other organizations as well. Thus most of the political side of their activities is carried on with the aid of the Liberal Federation. The members deputed for Labour join the various labour organizations. And some members are working in the co-operative movement, while others are engaged in social uplift work and Scouting. The Devadhar Reconstruction Trust in Malabar, with its many schools and other centres, is one such branch activity.

Membership of the Society is for life. On admission, every member has to undergo a special training for a period of five years under the expert guidance and rigorous control of the First Member or President of the Society. He must take the vow of poverty and service and must be content with the seventy rupees or so that the Society allows for his and his family's maintenance.

The headquarters are at Poona and there are branches in Bombay, Madras, Nagpur and Allahabad and smaller centres at Dohad, Lahore, Lucknow, Cuttack, Mayanoor, Calicut and Mangalore. Each of these centres is placed under the

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supervision of a senior member. The libraries attached to the various branches, as well as the larger one at Poona are filled with valuable books of wide national interest while specialising in the study of Economics, Gokhale's own favourite and special line. The Servants also conduct a few newspapers.

But in the sphere of politics, the contribution of the Servants, especially during the last few years, has not been so marked. That fact strikes at once, even a casual visitor to the country. And that distinguished journalist, Brailsford, who visited India during the height of the recent Civil Disobedience Movement, writes thus :

" The political news in these days seldom mentions the Servants of India. A generation ago, they ranked among the forces that were shaping India.....

" One notes a bitterness among these Liberals as they talk of the Congress. The Indian masses have swept ahead of them and left them stranded.

" Congress House in Bombay, while still it was open, was a swarming ant-heap. Curious, demonstrative crowds, thronged the streets outside it. Within its court-yard were fleets of motor-cars, placed at its service, and hundreds of young men worked in its offices at fever-heat.

" Ten minutes away was the headquarters from which the Servants did their educational and organizing work. One grey-haired worker sat reading in its cool library."

Mr Brailsford hoped, " in a calmer hour, if that should strike, the Order may regain its ascendency."

At least in one direction that hope is already being realised. The new Harijan fight of the Mahatma, has given almost a new lease of life to the Society. In that field, at least, the two meet in common and the Society has diligently

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grasped the splendid opportunity. At the historic conference at Poona, which terminated in the Yerrawada Pact, Messrs. Thakkar and Bakhale of the Society did yoemen service. And to-day, Thakkar and Kunzru stand as towers of strength to Mahatmaji in his great fight.

E. R. G.

Kesari Printing Works, Madras.